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Introduction

Gérald Préher and Emmanuel Vernadakis

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Introduction

Gérald Préher and Emmanuel Vernadakis

1 As a form, myth has been used in various contexts, endowed with various meanings, and approached in various ways throughout a complex, conflicting, and far-reaching history that makes it a slippery term—in Marcel Détienne's terms "a fish emulsified in the waters of mythology."[1] As a term, "myth" derives from the Greek mythos (*μύθος*), and means "plot" or "story." Originally, mythos contrasted logos (*λόγος*), namely a "truthful account." A competitive dynamic between mythos and logos can be traced back to Plato: although Plato uses myths—imaginative frames—to draw the reader in, he downplays his/her role in philosophical thought, worried as he is about the appeal of myth to our most basic passions. A common narrative grew out of this polemic approach through Christianity's insistence on reading myths allegorically, which late Renaissance scholarship used to tell about ancient civilisations: human progress followed a trajectory from mythos to logos, from myth to logic. Still going strong until the mid-20th century, this view made myths objects of contempt (Morales 12-15, also see 56-63). However, the rise of comparative anthropology as a discipline in the mid-19th century has turned myths into "interesting" objects (although they were still objects of contempt) mainly for the light they supposedly shed on the character of the mythmaker. The fortune of myths then rose gradually as, in the context of colonisation, the dialectics between mythos and logos brought about comparisons between, for instance, early Europeans and Native-Americans—with both peoples and myths disparaged as savage and unsophisticated. Then the mythmakers, whether ancient European or Non-European, turned out to be significant as objects of comparison, and mythology developed into a tool of self-discovery for both Europeans and European settlers in the New World, becoming an important figure in the discourse on self and other (See Csapo 12-15). During the second half of the 20th century, ancient and colonial rituals as well as various types of narratives, such as folktales, legends, fables, both written and oral, were seriously discussed in the fields of religious studies, anthropology, ethnology, psychology, linguistics, literature and structuralism. Scholars have produced as many definitions of myth as there are myths themselves. Still, to circumscribe myth's form or content has proved notoriously difficult, the more so as definitions rarely confront the equitability of concepts across time and cultures. This is

particularly embarrassing, for myth, as a concept, is supposed to date back to the origins of mankind and span across the globe. As it is, then, myth does not lend itself to a clear definition.

2 However, when an attempt is made to break with the essentialist tradition of defining myth for what it is, it becomes possible to understand it in relation to what it does. Eric Csapo notes that "Myth might be more usefully defined as a narrative which is considered socially important, and is told in such a way as to allow the entire social collective to share a sense of this importance [...]. There can be myths about recent events, contemporary personalities, new inventions. To insist that a myth or legend be a traditional tale is to confuse a symptom of their function of transmitting something of collective importance for part of their essence. Myth is a function of social ideology." (9). As such, to use Roland Barthes's formulation, it can "control and oppress" indeed, carry pernicious ideological overtones (190, our translation). In other terms, the stories, the lore, are only part of what constitutes the subject. Myth "happens" only when the stories become active agents: when people use them and share them. As Helen Morales has it, myth is not an object or a series of objects to be known, "[r]ather, it is a continual process of telling and retelling, of provoking and responding, of critiquing and revising. It is process rather than event. Or, to borrow Mary Beard's formulation, we should think of it as a verb, and not a noun" (115).

3 In a 2003 lecture, Tomson Highway acknowledges "The world [...] is filled with mythology—or rather mythologies. [...] Every race, every language, even every city, every town, every village has its own" (27). The present collection of articles illustrates such an idea for it demonstrates that such mythologies particularly inspire and sustain the letters of the South of the United States, a region where a strong oral tradition of storytelling and myth-making has always been of singular importance: religion and magic, traditional roles and characters, stereotypes and icons, local modes and codes, folktales and folk-songs all brand Southern literature with lore and ideology, prestige and pleasure, mystique, and fantasy. Southern Belles, cavaliers, mammies, slaves, plantations, the frontier... all endowed with symbolic dimensions find their way in myths that are made to speak to the South's new conditions. As Ben Forkner and Patrick Samway explain: "Readers of Southern fiction are familiar enough with the rough chronology of the plantation myth. As the South moved toward the final separation from the Union in mid-century, a growing movement of pro-Southern apologists began to praise the planter and project his life back into an old-world civilization, improved and humanized by its new setting and its uncorrupted agrarian values" (xvi). The plantation myth—paradise regained then forever lost—and the lore that came with it went round the world and seem to have stolen the limelight, elbowing other myths from other American regional cultures out of the way.

4 As Forkner and Samway suggest, some of the ways these myths operated, and still operate, are disturbing. Southern mythology may indeed be complicit in promoting a subjective and perhaps questionable view of history. The South has always been engaged in its own historical process of mythological construction. Thus, in *L'Aristocratie sudiste*, Etienne de Planchard has observed that in the South "history and myth are inextricably linked, one being the subjective interpretation of the other" (14, our translation). Myth can also be conniving in encouraging racism, nationalism, misogyny, and illusions. For instance, in the 19th century, William Gilmore Simms was regarded as the arch-defender of the increasingly mythical image of the South. In the

long swan song of his novels and short stories he contributed to inflating the ideals and values of the agricultural foundations of the South. But Simms was a pro-slavery writer and the use he makes of the plantation myth—and quite a few other concurrent myths —can be embarrassing. Myths have often been denounced (notably by Barthes) for their pernicious effects and ominous achievements. Should we, then, discard Simms and Southern myths or even say goodbye to mythology?

5 The present volume seems to answer the above question by a firm "no." Not just because Simms's fiction is of a high standard—Poe, who considered the short story unique and viewed its tightly knit structure as its primary asset, viewed Simms as a model short story writer—nor just because myths tell delightful stories: as this collection points out, myth may affirm oppressive ideologies, but it also has the capacity to provide spaces beyond them. Most of the essays show that myth can also be an instrument of subversion. It is certainly a tool endowing short fiction—and society—with a force for change. Indeed, several articles show how the mythical is grounded in the psychological and the political. This happens through four indigenous features: race, the frontier, the Puritan legacy, and political utopianism; to which gender must also be added. It therefore often comes to cross the path of the gothic, a mode (or genre?) particularly cherished in the South, a place which has a shared interest in the above indigenous features (Smith 164).

6 W. J. Cash proposes a panoply of different critical perspectives in *The Mind of the South* (1941) and the collective work directed by Charles W. Eagles (1992), *The Mind of the South: Fifty Years Later*, provides us with distinctive traits to examine the 20th and 21st century South. William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Tennessee Williams and Elizabeth Spencer, to name only a few Southern short story writers, plant their stories in a mythical Southern *topos*. They create a background for ruins of all sorts: historical, social and familial in association with the Southern past, and this is propitious for creating a narrative space particularly permeable for literary myths to unfold. In keeping with the image of the dispossessed garden, Lewis P. Simpson and C. Hugh Holman have described the Old South as a "kind of Eden." From this perspective, the Civil War is held responsible for having provoked a break with the South's prelapsarian roots—Holman points out that the Civil War tends to be viewed "as the bloody expulsion from that Eden" (38).

7 In *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), myth represents a fundamental source of inspiration for Southern identity. If the description of seasons and landscapes allows for a portrayal of linear time, depicting the cycles of nature opens up on the mythical dimension of nature encapsulating the atemporal narrative level of the story. These myths crystallize in tropes of early American untainted pastoral representations. One of the twelve Agrarians, Stark Young, challenged the limitations of the manifesto. He began by exalting the image of civilization as a constantly budding organism: "out of any epoch in civilization there may arise things worthwhile that are the flowers of it. To abandon these, when another epoch arrives, is only stupid, so long as there is still in them the breath and flux of life" (328). Numerous writers have used mythological figures—the phoenix, Penelope, or the Medusa—in order to enhance the Southern narrative space of the imaginary. The permanence of the past in Southern literature is thus inextricably linked not only to the region's history, but also to the myth it creates and keeps alive.

8 As a result, rereading this literature through the prism of myth allows us to better understand how Southern writers have integrated myth so as to affirm or negate their cultural heritage in the nation, their social-economic relationships and gender roles. As Todorov has pointed out, due to its brevity the short story does not represent life in the way a novel does; it thus becomes a fertile space for myth and fable to take root. This is in keeping with Charles E. May's theory regarding the origins of the short story. According to him, "the wellsprings of the form are as old as the primitive realm of myth [...]. [B]rief episodic narratives, which constitute the basis of the short story, are primary, preceding later epic forms which constitute the basis of the novel. In many ways, the short story with its usual focus on a single event and a single effect has remained close to its primal mythic source" (1). Myth survives through story-telling and story-writing; and so does the Old South. In the entry devoted to the "Mythic South" in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, George B. Tindall quotes anthropologist Raphael Patai according to whom "myth not only validates or authorizes customs, rites, institutions, beliefs, and so forth, but frequently is directly responsible for them" (126). When it comes to the South, such an idea can be used to suggest that the "mind of the South" stems out of a set of preconceived ideas that have been accepted and are now taken for granted. Myth can also be used as a means to debunk the real—Eudora Welty's "Worn Path" published at the beginning of the 1940s conjures up the figure of the phoenix through its central character, Phoenix Jackson, to assert the African-American presence in the region. Women writers in the South seem to be mirroring the endeavor of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's narrator in the "Yellow Wall-Paper" though the wall-paper appears to be a Confederate Flag. They are trying to define their identity by questioning the validity of the expression "Southern Belle." In their short fiction, they want to "communicate realistically the secret psychic life formerly presented allegorically in the mythic romance" (May 47) and, to do so, they somehow deconstruct Southern myths.

9 Myth can therefore inform paradigms of marginality, disruption and clan conflict encoded within Southern culture. Frank O'Connor has famously defined the short story as a genre that focuses on "outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society" (18) and it is obvious that Southern short fiction also revolves around such figures. By engaging in the study of the representation and rewriting of myth, this collection of essays endeavors to demonstrate the extent to which myths tap into the resources of short fiction. It considers how they are inherent to, and formative of the literary genre of brevity, which draws on symbolic sources.

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10 The following essays, organized chronologically, stem from a conference that took place at Lille Catholic University in 2013. It was sponsored by Lille Catholic University, the CRILA research group at the University of Angers and the *Suds d'Amériques* research group at the University of Versailles-Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines. Two guest writers attended the conference: Lisa Alther and Alice Clark. The round-table interview with Lisa Alther is included here as well as an exclusive interview with Ron Rash conducted by Frédérique Spill. In addition to the Southern scholars on the reading committee of the *Journal of the Short Story in English*, several colleagues accepted to review articles for this issue: Michel Bandry, Jacquie Berbin-Masi, Anne Garrait-Bourrier, Constante González-Groba, Jan Nordby Gretlund, Nicole Moulinoux, Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis,

François Pitavy, Jacques Pothier, Sarah Robertson, Owen Robinson, Hans Skei, Noel Sloboda, and Linda Wagner-Martin. We take this opportunity to thank them for their assistance and time.

11 The first article, by Ineke Bockting, analyzes "The Rape Complex in Short Fiction from the American South." It links the Southern Rape Complex, the erroneous belief that every black man is constantly on the outlook to rape a white woman, with the Myth of Southern Womanhood, which stages the southern woman as the epitome of purity and righteousness and as a symbol of the South as a whole. Her rape, then, is felt as a rape of the South and warrants the severest punishment. In this essay, Bockting analyzes the different aspects of the two interwoven myths in several short stories from the South, in prose and in poetry form.

12 In "Ellen Glasgow's 'Jordan's End': Antigone in the South?," Inès Casas shows that Glasgow's imagination was triggered by her realization of "the triumph in Virginia of idealism over actuality." Glasgow's first instinct was to denounce the facile myths of southern romanticism, especially those revealing the patriarchal indoctrination of the South. In "Jordan's End" (1923), Glasgow makes use of the classical myth of Antigone to explore the male-created, crippling myths of inferiority and innocence that tied southern women to their pedestal. Like the Greek tragic figure, Judith Jordan questions the Southern moral order by her pious act of euthanasia. Because of her final rejection of deference to myth, she is structurally silenced and caged just as Antigone is condemned to be entombed alive, for the narrator's idealization of her denies her the right to redefine her heritage in her own terms and free herself from the shackles of patriarchal oppression.

13 Susana Mª Jiménez Placer, in her article "From 'Faithful Old Servant' to 'Bantu Woman': Katherine Anne Porter's Approach to the Mammy Myth in 'The Old Order'," discusses Porter's Miranda stories that have been mostly interpreted as the writer's attempt to deconstruct the myth of the Old South. Jiménez Placer's analysis focuses on Porter's exploration of the mammy myth and its role in Miranda's development. The situation reflects Porter's intuition of the ultimately destructive effects hidden behind the affective connotations supposedly characterizing the relationship between mammies and their white families. In addition, Porter's depiction of the mammy parallels Miranda's adoption of a tomboyish attitude after Grandmother's death, which suggests that Miranda's tomboyism has connotations of uncertainty concerning not only the traditional gender roles but also the traditional racial roles.

14 In "Myth and Metaphor in James Agee's '1928 Story'," Rémi Digonnet explains that myth and metaphor intersect from the perspective of the constituent characteristics of the two literary processes. The figure of one word for another, along the substitutive perspective of metaphor, echoes the substitution of reality for myth. Transfer, like translation, seem to occur in a displaced and misplaced reality triggered by the mythic intention. The interactive perspective of metaphor between the metaphorical and the literal, if less obvious in myth or fable, which are both conceived as homogeneous interpretations, persists in a mythology which constructs a semantic impertinence, a caesura, yet also an intersection between fiction and reality. Like the reactivation of a metaphor, myth is constantly reactivated, thwarted in order to be re-enacted. Through the study of James Agee's "1928 Story," Digonnet's article shows what is being re-acted in both myth and metaphor. He analyses in what ways what initially resembles a

repetition or a reiteration turns into creative energy, producing meaning, rewriting and reinterpretation.

15 Amélie Moisy's "Myth for the Masses: Erskine Caldwell's 'Daughter'" focuses on Caldwell's personal take on Southern mythology for he rewrites ancient myths and creates a new one. In "Daughter," a poor sharecropper is in jail for murdering his daughter who complained of hunger. Caldwell's flouting of expectations and use of repetition creates a socialist myth of working class solidarity, having the crowd mete out its own justice, deciding that "it doesn't seem right" that a poor man should be prosecuted. Moisy illustrates how the story's ending is both a departure from Caldwell's usual bleak sharecropper stories bespeaking a political purpose, and a habitual shattering of Southern myth. Recalling Roland Barthes' opposition of leftist and conservative mythologies, which the story seems to bear out, Moisy determines in what ways it is nonetheless representative of Caldwell's stature as mythmaker.

16 In "Frontiers of Myth and Myths of the Frontier in Caroline Gordon's 'Tom Rivers' and 'The Captive'," Elisabeth Lamothe focuses on Gordon's variations on the genres of the frontier story and the captivity narrative to debunk the artificiality of the South's scripts of masculine and feminine identity. Departing from the captivity narrative's reliance on the reinforcement of identity and social norms, Gordon explores through "The Captive" the many forms of subjugation and control of women and Natives devised by a so-called civilized American society. She explores the paradoxical liberation there is in her protagonist's so-called captivity while questioning the notion of redemption.

17 Françoise Buisson provides us with another facet of Gordon's oft-forgotten genius in her comparative piece "William Faulkner's 'My Grandmother Millard' and Caroline Gordon's 'The Forest of the South': Comic and Tragic versions of the Southern Belle Myth." She shows that in both narratives the heroines are led to play a major role that points to the collapse of the Southern belle myth. Nevertheless, while Faulkner's story takes on a comic dimension and turns out to be both a personal and a historical farce, the tone of Gordon's text, with its more oblique and ambivalent message, proves to be bitter and tragic. In fact, Buisson demonstrates, the ironical mode prevails in both stories which are aimed at debunking the Southern belle myth. The authors play with the codes of the romance and the Plantation novel. The use of Southern topoi, traditional episodes and stock characters gives the writer the opportunity to gain in narrative space; hence the symbolical, even allegorical dimension of the genre which can be compared to myth.

18 Looking at another major author, Eudora Welty, Ben Forkner in "Converging Toward the Human: Myth and Memory in 'The Wide Net' (and Me)," analyzes the story and reads it in a very personal perspective. His reading is framed by his own experience as a Southerner but, beyond the anecdotal element, what he shows his readers is that the meaning of a story can only stem from a personal experience. It is a Southerner's reading of "The Wide Net" which highlights the width of the net itself—a net that is big enough for any reader to express his/her own interpretation.

19 In his essay "Violent Fragility: The Mythical and the Iconic in Tennessee Williams' Politics of Gender in 'One Arm'," Emmanuel Vernadakis discusses "One Arm," a 1945 story which sides against the death penalty. In it, however, capital punishment is combined with a socially constructed structure of gender and a symbolic illustration of the South. Specific features and identity principles relating to Apollo and Dionysus find

their way into Williams's hero whose flaw—the missing arm—makes of him an epitome of the myth of the South. As an antinomian figure dominated by the Nietzschean conflict between Apollonian form and Dionysian matter, Oliver discovers that his flaw is also a weapon. The effect of his paradoxical identity is translated into visual similes and metaphors which draw on Iacchus', Dionysus' avatar (as revisited by D.H. Lawrence), in order to transform Oliver into an icon that serves gender oriented politics and makes the story operate at a high ideological level. Williams' bisexual character transcends the strictures of morality of the time of writing and baffles the borders of the story pleading for individual completion and social inclusiveness. Hovering between fragility and violence, Oliver's icon seems eventually to stand for Williams' own oeuvre whose politics of gender are promoted by drawing on myth.

20 Françoise Clary, explores another facet of the South in her discussion of the African-American, "Black Image and Blackness: Rewriting Myth as Cultural Code in Ralph Ellison's 'King of the Bingo Game'." Focusing on the idea that African American short stories are tools for learning, Clary examines how Ellison revisits the issue of myth in the context of the African-American experience and questions whether the rewriting of myth as cultural code gives birth to a new black image akin to Houston Baker's view of "blackness in motion toward modernity." Clary uses varying perspectives: a repositioning of center and margin, the exposure of transcendence rising from a discovery of self and a framing of blackness predicated on the modernization of the black hero. The ethno-cultural dimension of myth—as it is notably emphasized by Ellison—is therefore to be seen as a way to keep black people from engaging in a pathological adjustment to the ethnocentric context of white American society. Clary argues that in Ellison's short-story, African American social myths get inspiration from black folklore where the weak can outwit the oppressor thus encouraging the underdog to search for ways to outsmart the system.

21 In "Good Country People Between Old South and New South in Flannery O'Connor's Short Fiction," Ruth Fialho suggests that any reader, when confronted with a work of fiction located in the American South, expects to be presented with a pastoral vision of America, thus forgetting the dramatic growth of Southern cities since World War II. The "Good Country People" that the reader meets in the three short stories by Flannery O'Connor analyzed here ("A Circle in the Fire"; "Greenleaf"; "A View of the Woods") are caught between two perspectives: the continuity of cyclical time that links them to the land and an unwavering belief in God's approval or the disruption implied by modernity. O'Connor chooses to question these narratives and offers the reader an encounter with a new myth whose meaning and purpose will be unveiled through social tension, textual games and a religious awakening.

22 Focusing on the short story "Jump-Up Day," Bénédicte Meillon, in "Revisiting the Universal Significance of Mythologies: Barbara Kingsolver's Syncretic and Mythopoeic Short Story 'Jump-Up Day'," shows how Kingsolver's transcultural rewriting of myth reconnects with the origins of the short story genre in myth. The story might offer a syncretic vision that reveals a different reading of Christian myths, made compatible with other cultures and myths. Meillon argues that this story triggers a two-fold, dynamic process, as it demythologizes while paradoxically re-mythologizing the relationship between story and myth. She first looks at the magic and religious elements in the story which may read as fantastic, uncanny or magical realist and then ventures a psycho-analytical reading of the story, staging a return of the repressed

leading to the final, enchanting revelation. Finally, she explores the role of the Obeah Man as a Caribbean Janus, whose character functions, like the Roman God of passages, as mediator between black and white, life and death, Christianity and Obeah, magic and reality, dream and waking life, or myth and short story. Essentially, Meillon explains, Kingsolver's story deals with liminality and in-betweenness. It may read as postcolonial and ecofeminist, and helps bring about an antidualistic and numinous revelation, the universal significance of which Kingsolver's Southern and global readers alike can bring home.

23 Marcel Arbeit's article "Appalachian Myths and Stereotypes in Chris Offutt's 'Sawdust' and 'Melungeons'," analyzes two short stories with a focus on two stereotypes connected with Appalachian people involving both their contempt for education and their violent and vengeful nature, resulting in feuds. It explains the relationship between myth and stereotype and, in accordance with recent psychological and sociological research, considers stereotypes to be a specific kind of so-called "legitimizing myths." The background against which the stereotypes are explored is the myth of the origin of Appalachian people. Discussing Sarah Hardy's research into affinities between short stories and oral narratives, Lisa Alther's historical investigation of the Melungeons, and Chris Offutt's theoretical remarks about storytelling, Arbeit shows that it is the close relationship of short stories with folk tales that makes the short story the best genre for rendering myths and stereotypes.

24 Candela Delgado Marín looks closely at Bobbie Ann Mason's short fiction in "Looming Myths of Frontiers in The South: Bobbie Ann Mason and Postmodern Uncertainties." She shows that Mason portrays a South that still operates around the North/South division, whilst being surrounded by liminal spaces of postmodernity. The concept of "southernness" becomes in this context a myth, unable to encompass the complexities of Mason's Kentuckian characters. Delgado Marín's article attempts to illustrate how the past manifests itself in Mason's southern places, language and identities that belong, however, to post-southern contexts. Mason creates stories that challenge cultural and formal myths to represent accurately the contrasting nature of the South she writes about with an underlying pride and optimism, but, nevertheless, never idealizing her roots.

25 In her discussion of another Appalachia writer, Ron Rash, Frédérique Spill, in "Ron Rash's Burning Bright (2010): Rewriting the Debacle of the South in the Present," shows that the South that is brought to life is dark, desolate, miserable and haunted by figures of failure. For Spill the major reason for this is that Rash's Appalachia played a very singular part in the American Civil War and Burning Bright constantly seems to be replaying and reinterpreting the script of the essential defeat of the region. The stories thus show how the South is inexorably trapped in the vicious circle of its own debacle. And yet, despite the bleakness of their contexts, they literally "burn bright," developing compelling poetic figures that leave deep marks on the reader's mind. Building up around a key trauma somehow become a myth, Burning Bright sprouts from a characteristic tension—that between bleakness and brightness.

26 The last article is Tanya Tromble's "Joyce Carol Oates's 'Little Maggie': Southern Myth in Ballad Form and Beyond" which also deals with Appalachia but this time from an outsider's point of view. "Little Maggie" is a traditional folk song, probably from the late 1800s, which tells the tale of a hard-drinking, fun-loving heartbreaker. Oates's story "Little Maggie—A Mystery" is the tale of the rise to fame of country singer Blue-

Eyed Bill Brandy from mythical Vergennes County, Kentucky, and its repercussions on his left-behind wife and children. "Little Maggie," Bill's most popular song, has had generations trying to unravel the mystery of the elusive woman's identity. By the end of the story, the narrator, Bill's daughter, has solved the mystery of Little Maggie, knowledge that brings a certain closure, but little peace. Tromble discusses the mysteries of the mythical Little Maggie ballad character explored in the story as well as Oates's continued perpetuation of the myth through reference to the character in yet another story, "The Haunting."

27 The essays are followed by a new story by Alice Clark, "Trick or Treat," which revolves around Southern violence and makes clear that the line between reality and myth can be quite thin at times.

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NOTES

1. "un poisson soluble dans les eaux de la mythologie" (238, our translation).

AUTHORS

GÉRALD PRÉHER

Lille Catholic University

EMMANUEL VERNADAKIS

University of Angers